

SOFTWARE LABS

Web-design software

Karl Wright puts nine web-design packages through their paces to find out which will create a site for sore eyes and which will help you produce an online masterpiece

The internet has been part of public life for over 10 years. Time enough, you would think, for someone to create a web-design package that wasn't baffling and frustrating. All too often, however, web design feels arcane and impenetrable, closed to all but the initiated. That's why this month we've reviewed nine web-design programs for normal people. Some have been designed specifically for beginners, while others are for users with a little more experience.

The first thing we considered when comparing the products on test was the quality of their output. By this we don't just mean whether or not the code conformed to W3C standards (W3C is the non-profit organisation responsible for web standards). Given that these programs are intended for non-technical users, the quality of their output in most cases will depend largely on the quality of the program's templates, its default settings and the advice given in its manual or help file.

We judged harshly any program with a clumsy or imprecise design environment, as there are few things more frustrating, particularly for users who are not comfortable with tweaking HTML code. As well as working with HTML, we wanted to see evidence that a program could integrate other web technologies. At the very least, this meant being able to create or link to Cascading Style Sheets (CSS). These enable you to customise the look of an entire site, applying styles to

many pages at once, and are one of the main foundations of modern web design. We also looked at how successfully the program made scripting technologies and other dynamic web-design elements available to novice users.

EASY DOES IT

Another important aspect is ease of use. By this we mean that important tools and features are clearly labelled and easy to find, that the behaviour of objects within a workspace is logical and predictable and that help files and tutorials are comprehensive and well written. Users should also be able to publish their websites to a web server without difficulty.

We also wanted users to be able to progress beyond the basics without having to upgrade to a new program. Preferably the software should allow them to move from using the visual workspace (usually referred to as the 'what you see is what you get' or WYSIWYG environments) to working directly with the code. If this option wasn't available, we looked for other facilities provided by the manufacturer to help users move beyond the templates.

Whether you're an artistic type who wants a blank canvas to work with or a techie who loves tweaking and tinkering, the best of these programs can make web design great fun. Read on to find out which programs are best for helping you get online.

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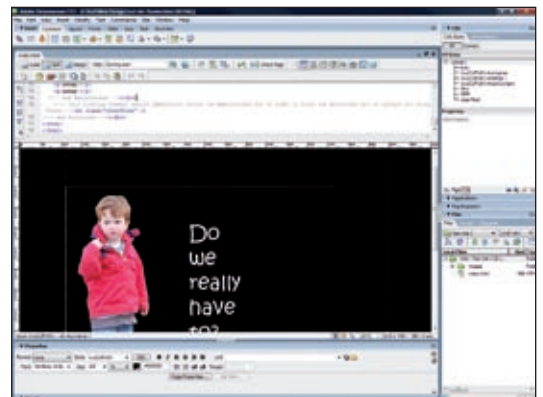
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The professionals' choice Dreamweaver and Expression Web

The most expensive program in this test costs well under £150. Professional web-development programs cost much more. The market leader, Adobe Dreamweaver, will set you back around £400 including VAT. Microsoft Expression Web, Dreamweaver's main competitor, is a comparative snip at £250.

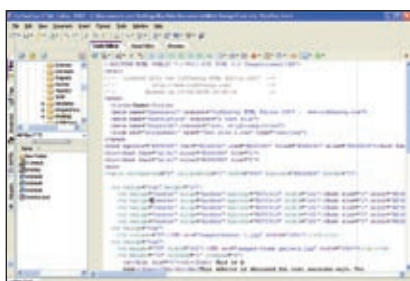
So what's the difference between these professional programs and those in our review? Unlike the applications designed for non-professionals, Dreamweaver and Expression give you complete freedom to jump back and forth between code and WYSIWYG workspaces and to edit all the code on a page. Other features that distinguish these programs from many of their cheaper competitors include their ability to check code for errors and compatibility problems, and the provision of add-ons such as Dreamweaver's Device Central, which shows you what your page will look like on various mobile web devices.

The big difference, however, is the way in which web-design applications interact with other crucial web-development programs and technologies. Dreamweaver has a head start here, as it comes from the same stable as Adobe Flash and



▲ Professional web-design tools such as Dreamweaver provide greater access to a website's code, among other things, but they cost many times more and are overkill for novice users

Photoshop, both of which are widely used by web developers. Both Dreamweaver and Expression provide extensive support for database-driven web development, allowing you to connect your site to a database, such as MySQL, and to embed the code or script to display content dynamically in your page.



▲ CoffeeCup HTML Editor requires some knowledge of HTML, but it also offers a complete design environment at a low price

COFFEECUP CoffeeCup HTML Editor 2007

★★★★★

£32 inc VAT
From www.coffeecup.com

Of all the programs on test, CoffeeCup HTML Editor 2007 is the one that most requires the user to have at least some knowledge of HTML. However, don't let this put you off – there are lots of reasons to like this program, not least its low price.

Originally, CoffeeCup HTML Editor only allowed you to work with code, and there was no WYSIWYG workspace at all. Even now, the WYSIWYG environment feels underdeveloped compared with those of its competitors. Things that you'd normally expect to be able to do, such as specifying a background colour or page transition effect, you can do only in code. However, this is not as intimidating as it sounds. The program's menus and wizards walk you through fairly complicated tasks, such as creating dynamic HTML elements, step by step.

There are a few things about the program that we don't like, however. We could do without being forced to save the file we're working on each time we switch between code and WYSIWYG editing. Placing images inside a table was tricky (the image always seemed to sit on top of the table) and, while linking to external Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) is easy enough to do in code, it would have been handy to have a quick-fix tool for this.

Having said that, this is a great program for anyone who likes to tinker with things and wants to understand how a website works. If you know even a little bit about HTML or are prepared to learn, you can quickly get very good results from CoffeeCup HTML Editor. Simply use the WYSIWYG environment to do the basic formatting, stick text and photos where you want them, and then use the code view to tweak everything into precisely the shape you want. The price is great, too.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Very good price
- ✓ Lots of useful features
- ✗ Requires HTML knowledge

WEB-DESIGN SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98/2000/XP/Vista, 133MHz processor, 128MB RAM, 200MB disk space, Internet Explorer 6 or later
DETAILS www.coffeecup.com



▲ Over-designed and difficult to use, Magix's Website Maker interface needs a complete overhaul. A manual would be nice, too

MAGIX Website Maker Easy

★★★

£24 inc VAT per year
From www.magix-website.com

Like Mr Site Takeaway Website (reviewed right), Magix Website Maker is a hosting service with an online web-design application built in. Unlike Mr Site, however, it costs only £24 a year for 5GB of online space.

The web-design package is a Flash application that runs in its own browser window. This sounds cool, and certainly the site templates – some of which include animations and sound – look impressive, but the design process is far less straightforward than Mr Site's. The Flash application is also much less responsive than a plain webpage. Often elements became editable only two or three seconds after we had selected them. Editing text was a nightmare, as we were unable to highlight sections of the placeholder text and delete it. Instead, we had to place our cursor at the end of a paragraph and then work our way backwards, deleting as we went.

Not only was the interface confusing and clumsy, but the manual was also woefully inadequate. It didn't even cover fundamental topics such as working with images. Publishing your site is simple, at least. You just choose Publish from Website Maker's file menu and it does the job for you (your domain is actually part of the Magix domain, for instance <http://jbloggs1.magix.net/website>).

This is a slow, clunky, poorly thought-out way of getting a website. Website Maker would be far better off if Magix ditched the over-complicated Flash-based program and opted for a simple set of menus and templates accessible from its website. If it offered the same service as Mr Site for this price, we'd have been far more impressed. As it stands, the hosting deal is good but if you want to take advantage of it we suggest you bypass Magix Website Maker and use your own web-design program instead.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Good price
- ✗ Slow and difficult to use
- ✗ Templates are restrictive

WEB-DESIGN PACKAGE Requires 400MHz Pentium III processor, 128MB RAM, 100MB disk space, internet browser with Flash 7 and Java 2 runtime environment
DETAILS www.magix-website.com



▲ Mr Site Takeaway Website is a simple way of building a respectable-looking site quickly, as long as you don't mind its restrictive approach

MR SITE Mr Site Takeaway Website

★★★★★

£30 inc VAT for the first year; £2.49 per month thereafter
From www.mrsite.com

Mr Site Takeaway Website isn't a program that you install on your PC; it's a hosting service that comes with a built-in web-design package. Compared with other hosting companies' web-design tools, this one is very good. Designing a simple site takes only a few minutes. You just choose a template from one of the many on offer, decide on your colour scheme and fill the content frames with text and images.

The service also allows you to add interactive and dynamic features, such as a guestbook and an audio jukebox, to your site. As with the basic page elements, you add these features using Mr Site's easy menu system. Publishing your site to the web is also straightforward. Simply click on Publish Your Site and your files are uploaded to the server you specified during setup. As well as the web-design tool, your package buys you your own domain name, a year's worth of hosting and 20 email addresses (name@yourdomain.com).

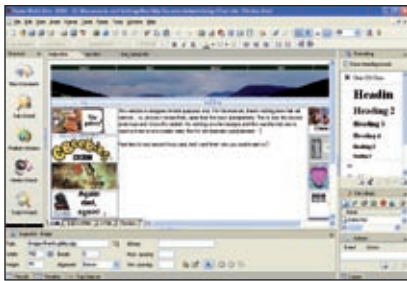
Simplicity does, however, come at a cost. Although there are many templates on offer, they all follow a very similar basic layout: a header, a footer and left-hand navigation. As a result, no matter what stylistic quirks and odd fonts you apply, your design choices are limited and the different templates all have a similar look and feel.

The Mr Site web-design package imposes far more restrictions on the user's choices than we'd expect from an ordinary program that you install on your desktop. However, it's far better than other web-design packages provided by hosting services that we've seen. When you also take into account the speed with which you can get a site online and the competitive price of the hosting services, Mr Site is good value for anyone who wants to put a good-looking site online quickly without having to learn web design.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Good-value hosting
- ✓ Easy to understand
- ✗ Restrictive templates

WEB-DESIGN PACKAGE Requires Internet Explorer 6 or later, Firefox 1.5 or later or Safari 2 or later
DETAILS www.mrsite.com



▲ Namo's WebEditor has a logical layout and provides quick access to all the features you need to make your site look the way you want

NAMO WebEditor 2006

★★★★★

COMPUTER
SHOPPER
BEST BUY

£68 inc VAT
From www.namo.com

Namo WebEditor 2006 is laid out like Adobe's Dreamweaver, with the site library on the left, the properties inspector at the bottom of the screen and the main workspace in the centre. Like Dreamweaver it puts an asterisk next to the name of a file that has been modified but not saved, and also like Dreamweaver it allows you to work in code, in WYSIWYG or in a split screen that shows both. Happily, all this imitation is a good thing: the layout is logical, easy to work with and lets you get a lot done by flicking between the different workspaces.

With the property inspector always visible by default, the WYSIWYG environment is precise and easy to use. Select any element and you can specify most aspects of its appearance and behaviour (colour, alignment on the page or within its container, background colour and so on) using the properties inspector. For fine tweaks, you can easily switch into code. If you don't want to work in code, however, you won't often have to. Jobs such as specifying a page background or linking to an external CSS sheet can be done in the WYSIWYG environment.

However, Namo WebEditor differs from Dreamweaver in providing far more hand-holding for novice users. Using the media wizard, for instance, you can embed a music or video file in your website and specify which program it should be played with in seconds. Similarly, using the script wizard you can add dynamic design elements, such as expanding navigation menus and image rollovers, without having to learn a scripting language. There's even a database wizard that supports a variety of scripting languages and database connections, allowing you to create basic database-driven websites.

Considering its combination of simplicity, precision, versatility and a competitive price, Namo WebEditor is the clear winner of our Best Buy award.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Lots of good features
- ✓ Very precise
- ✓ Easy to use

WEB-DESIGN SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98/Me/2000/XP/Vista, 550MHz processor, 128MB RAM, Internet Explorer 5 or later
DETAILS www.namo.com



▲ WebPlus X2 feels like a DTP program that's been adapted for web design. It's too cluttered and suffers from odd quirks and limitations

SERIF WebPlus X2

★★★★

£60 inc VAT
From www.serif.com

Serif's WebPlus X2 looks like a good deal. For just £60 you can not only design and publish your website, but also embed podcasts, RSS feeds, photoblogs and even a convincing online shop. It's not the features that let this program down, though; it's the basic design.

For a start, the interface is far too cluttered. Even an experienced designer will have difficulty getting to grips with the proliferation of menus, tabs and buttons on the screen. Some of the best features, such as the ability to add a podcast or RSS feed, look as if they're going to be simple and then turn out to be anything but. A wizard-based approach to these tasks would have been far better.

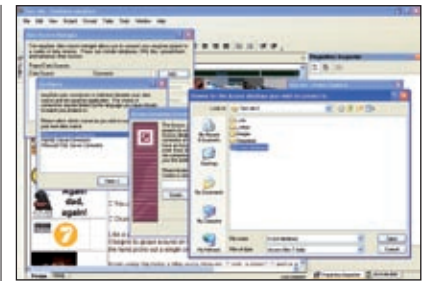
The program also suffers from some peculiar quirks. We imported a site that uses tables to help position certain elements on the page. When we exported the site from Serif's native format to HTML, the program had broken our tables into CSS positioning elements. In itself, this is fine: CSS positioning is a leaner way to lay out your page. At the same time, however, WebPlus had also changed the colour of some of our text, and we had to hunt through the CSS information to find the code that specified the incorrect colour. Strangely, although it imported all the page names correctly, WebPlus went on to rename the files when it exported them to HTML. We were also a little dismayed to discover that you can't flip between HTML and design views. In fact, you can't see the code at all unless you specifically create an HTML page (as opposed to making pages in WebPlus's own format), and then you can't view them in the WYSIWYG environment.

Serif WebPlus isn't a bad program. It's just too cluttered and too much like a DTP program that's been adapted to output to HTML. Serif would have been far better off sticking with its usual formula of offering a good budget program that competes with market leaders feature for feature.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Good templates
- ✗ Interface very cluttered
- ✗ Can't view HTML pages in WYSIWYG

WEB-DESIGN SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP/Vista, 256MB RAM, 400MB disk space
DETAILS www.serif.com



▲ EasyGen 2's Data Source Manager lets you connect your website to a database and then pull content from it or post content to it

SYMBIANT EasyGen 2 Dynamic Website Builder

★★★★★

£63 inc VAT
From www.pcwb.com

If you want your users to interact with your site so that its content changes in response, you need a database-driven site. This approach offers a wide range of features, from simple user login and password-protection functions to completely dynamic pages that are generated entirely on the basis of the user's input (although the site template, its look and feel, will remain constant). There is a snag, though: to create a database-driven website, you need a programmer.

That's where EasyGen comes in. It's designed to automate the programming behind database-driven websites. If you already have a database, EasyGen simply connects to it using the database connection tool. You can then use the Action Builder to create, get and post actions that allow your page to interact with the database. It takes some practice and you will have to read the manual carefully to get the results you want, but it's a lot easier than learning how to program.

Alternatively, you can start from scratch and create a database using the Build Data Source tool. Simply specify the input fields on your webpage that you wish to store in your database – you can create an entirely new database to fill using the database connector – and EasyGen will create a new table in your database for you.

EasyGen's design environment isn't as polished as that of Namo WebEditor. It has fewer useful properties on display by default, but for the most part you can work with precision. Happily, despite EasyGen using its own file format, you can edit HTML as you go.

While it won't suite all small businesses and home users, this package is excellent for anyone who wants to create a dynamic, interactive website but doesn't have the budget to hire a programmer.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Relatively easy to use
- ✓ Bypasses the need for a programmer
- ✗ WYSIWYG environment could be better

WEB-DESIGN SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98/NT/2000/XP/Vista, 90MHz processor, 64MB RAM, 50MB disk space
DETAILS www.easygen.com



▲ Web Easy Professional makes it difficult to work in code but its WYSIWYG environment is frustratingly imprecise

VCOM Web Easy Professional 7

★★

£40 inc VAT

From <http://shop.avanquest.com>

This strange program has a very inappropriate name – the ‘web’ part we can just about live with, but easy it is not. The WYSIWYG environment is incredibly clumsy. You can’t edit a page unless it’s viewed at 100 per cent. If you pan out or zoom in, you have to go back to the actual size before you can change what you’re looking at. If you set the border of a table to zero, the table becomes invisible not only when viewed in a browser but also in Web Easy’s own WYSIWYG window, making design a challenge. The only way we could merge the cells in a table was by going into the code view.

Code view consists of a small box that is impossible to resize. To get to this box, you open the Properties Inspector and click on the tag that corresponds to the element you want to tweak. This is hardly comparable to the speed and convenience of Namo WebEditor.

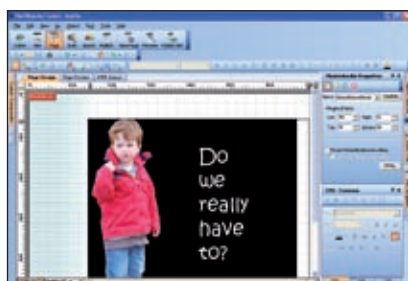
The interface is clumsy, with non-standard navigational tools and a confusing relationship between the sidebar and the main toolbar. Clicking on a button in the sidebar changes the menus available above. The Properties pane on the right-hand side hides detailed information within categories that you expand by clicking on them, so when you select an item in the WYSIWYG environment, you don’t instantly see any useful information at all. On the plus side, the bottom of the screen is taken up by a useful visual file browser, which is good for finding graphic or media files quickly.

If you want a web-design program that doesn’t cost that much, buy CoffeeCup HTML Editor. You may have to learn a bit more about the nuts and bolts of web design, but you’ll get the results you’re after. If you need a quick and easy web-design tool, go for XSite Pro or Mr Site Takeaway. Sadly, Web Easy Professional is neither easy to use nor particularly cheap when you consider what you get for your money.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Useful file browser
- ✗ Very difficult to edit code
- ✗ Clumsy interface

WEB-DESIGN SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP/Vista, 500MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 150MB disk space
DETAILS www.avanquest.com/UK



▲ NetObjects Fusion looks dated and offers very limited access to your site’s HTML code, resulting in boring, cheesy websites

WEBSITE PROS NetObjects Fusion 10

★★

£135 inc VAT

From www.netobjects.com

NetObjects Fusion 10 is the most expensive program in this test. To justify its hefty price, it needed to offer something that its rivals lack. Unfortunately, it got off to a poor start with its limited and rather cheesy selection of site templates.

Instead of relying on these, we decided to create a blank site and design it ourselves. On opening our ‘blank’ site we were surprised to discover that it already had a header, a footer, a main content frame and a left-hand navigation bar. We were being channelled into using a corporate-style c-frame layout, which will probably suit many small businesses but can look dull. What’s more, the readymade elements were blocky, with big, rounded corners. You can customise your site by choosing from lots of different styles, each composed of standard HTML files, CSS files and various elements of page furniture, but most are just as cheesy as the default options.

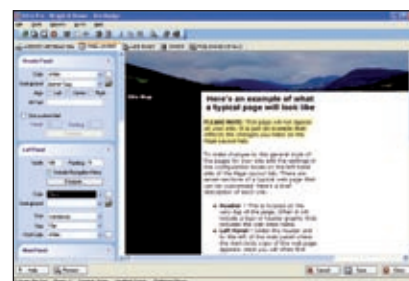
Compared with Namo WebEditor, Fusion’s WYSIWYG environment is clumsy and imprecise. When you place an element such as an image on the page, it appears in a random location. You must then drag and nudge it to where you want it. Worse still, it’s impossible to edit most of the HTML code. Only certain, often very small, areas of the page can be edited – most of the code is locked. On the plus side, the program makes it easy for non-technical users to add useful elements such as fly-out menus and animated photo galleries to their site, but while they might be technically impressive, these elements look as dated and corny as the rest of the design templates.

Anyone who’s ever used a word processor or a basic DTP program will be able to find their way around NetObjects Fusion. Sadly, it doesn’t provide enough control unless you’re already an experienced designer, so the chances are your site will look cheesy.

SUMMARY

- ✓ Simple interface
- ✗ Limited range of templates
- ✗ Expensive

WEB-DESIGN SOFTWARE Requires Windows 2000/XP, 660MHz processor, 256MB RAM, 250MB disk space
DETAILS www.netobjects.com



▲ XSite Pro takes a very modular approach to site design. This is no bad thing, but the program is just too expensive for what it does

XSITE XSite Pro

★★★★

£99 inc VAT

From www.xsitepro.com

XSite Pro takes a different approach to other package here, except Mr Site Takeaway, which is similar in intent if not execution. Instead of a WYSIWYG area, a code area and so on, the program presents a series of tabs, most of which contain drop-down menus.

The design process works as follows. In the tab page layout, you use the left-hand menus to specify which elements you want on your template page (header, footer, left-hand navigation and so on) and how they should look, their colour and layout, the attributes of sub-elements and so on. Unless you specify otherwise, each page you create thereafter will use the template you have created. If you want to create a page that doesn’t conform to the template, simply select Ignore Page Layout Settings on the New Page dialog. It’s easy to specify which pages should be included in your navigation system and whether they will be main pages or subpages, and the program automatically creates a site map for you.

This method of design is a little restrictive, but not as much as it sounds. In most cases you’ll end up with a fairly standard c-frame design, with a header, left-hand navigation and footer. However, the program offers a surprising degree of customisation, including the ability to create pop-up windows. If you run a small business and you want to get a respectable-looking site up and running quickly and be able to maintain it without learning web design, this approach works well.

Our one reservation is with the design ethos imparted in the manual. With so little room for artistic flair, it’s easy to create clunky, blocky-looking pages. There’s no need to exacerbate the problem by using the Courier font or red, centred headlines.

If XSite Pro were cheaper, it would be a good choice for small businesses that value ease and control over creativity. However, at this price we can’t recommend it. **CS**

SUMMARY

- ✓ Very logical and easy
- ✓ Quick results
- ✗ Expensive; restrictive design ethos

WEB-DESIGN SOFTWARE Requires Windows 98/NT/Me/2000/XP, 1GHz processor, 256MB RAM, 100MB disk space
DETAILS www.xsitepro.com